Building #Occupy 2.0: How can we strengthen our movement?

Revolution USA Mon, 16/01/2012 - 11:23
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Almost five months ago, after a dozen or so individuals gathered for a direct-action demonstration against the greed and corruption of the economic elites of Wall Street and Washington has since then transformed into one of the largest and most dynamic global social movements of recent memory.

What took place and existed on the streets of New York and eventually re-christened Liberty Square in early September and carried over almost to the end of 2011 was a great example of a microcosm, a manifestation of the frustration of the masses of youth, students, workers, and the socially oppressed of the USA and world against austerity, exploitation, poverty, misery, and indignation at governments for their measured, meticulous “assistance” to those responsible for the situation (the big banks) and their outright punishment of the remaining 99%.

Yet what began seemingly as “just another demonstration” soon evolved into an occupation, an action that embodied the unwillingness of protesters to give in to any compromise, any reconciliation, any attempt at at forceful dispersion by the state.

Inspired by such a bold and daring action, thousands across the US declared open solidarity with #OccupyWallStreet (OWS) and set up their own local occupations to protest skyrocketing austerity, crisis, and mounting social inequality. Those hundreds quickly turned into tens of thousands, and within a month #Occupy was established in cities around the globe. From New York to LA, London to Berlin, Warsaw to Istanbul, Cairo to Lahore, US-inspired #Occupy has been met with solidarity and imitation worldwide.

For months we Occupiers have learned the ropes of resistance, all the while withstanding police brutality and intimidation in the forms of bullets, citations, handcuffs, and grenades. The legend of #Occupy and the struggle between the 99% and 1% grew as did its size and influence. Mass demonstrations and strikes and self-defense lines responded, in turn, to increasing attack from state forces, ever enhancing the radical prestige of the movement in the eyes of those by participating and those considering joining the fight.

But now that the majority of #Occupy camps have been torn down and participants evicted by police offensives, we face key issues of evaluating our recently past efforts and methods of struggle and drawing practical conclusions for how to surmount the difficulties we faced that served ultimately to restrain our movement from achieving its full potential.

Yet the movement is not about to embark on the traversing of this new, crucial transitional phase unprepared but rather armed with a wealth of experiences that, if recognized and its lessons assimilated, can help guide the movement in its efforts to increase the magnitude of its victories as the struggle against the 1% continues and which serves to revive the tenacity, vitality, and militancy that characterized it.

If there was one realization that was brought on in the most shocking and breathtaking manner, it was no doubt the the nature and role played by the police. Those who were originally skeptical or unsure of which
The police were shown through experience in a most unfortunate (and ultimately despicable) manner. Through bullets, grenades, and beatings, the #Occupy protesters of Oakland learned that the police protect and serve only the 1%: their paymasters. After this experience those at Occupy Oakland heeded agitation for the formation of self-defense and began deploying their veteran soldier comrades to organize defense lines. This was most definitely a maturing moment in the struggle against the 1% as we learned not only the position of one of the most powerful repressive forces in society but also the importance of independent, democratic associations for organization: self-defense groups, committees, bodies, etc. Success for the future of the movement will center around answering questions on how best to neutralize and disarm ultimately the ?bourgeois cops? of the 1% as the conflict grows more acute and intense. Alongside the revelation regarding the purpose and class character of the police, also has the need for reevaluation and alteration of organizational practice. On the positive side, the General Assemblies, the working groups, the spokes-council system have enabled and offered the ability and opportunity for masses of people to voice their indignation and frustration at the system, propose policy, and shape the course of the movement?s direction: in short, it opened up tremendous space at the most grassroots of levels for democratic self-expression and decision-making. Nevertheless, there were undoubtedly hang-ups, unquestionably nightmarishly convoluted procedural processes that made reaching decisions for actions on crucial questions at a time of pressing urgency quite vexing and very difficult if not impossible. The trials and tribulations of OWS with regard to complex organizational/financial relationships between autonomous and semi-autonomous working groups and the NYC General Assembly have been documented:

?The reality of OWS is that the ?horizontal? modified consensus method, the GA, and the spokescouncil [1] are all highly dysfunctional [2] but not fatally so (at least at this stage). Prior to the eviction, many OWS working groups began secretly hoarding street donations they received from the GA?s official finance working group [3] (FWG) because they put lots of money into the general fund but faced serious hurdles in getting any money out of it for badly needed items due to OWS?s protracted, bureaucratic decision-making process. Also, because FWG administers over $500,000 in internet donations, many working groups saw no need to contribute to a fund flush with cash and resented what amounted to a one-way cashflow. The money hoarding was part of a divide that emerged between full-time occupiers who felt disenfranchised and eventually boycotted the GA on the one hand and movement types (many of whom did not sleep in Liberty Park) who believed that the modified consensus process was the single most important element of the uprising on the other. This divide manifested itself geographically [4] with the emergence of a ?ghetto? and a ?gentrified? area that was captured in a DailyShowsegment [5].? (Occupy and the Tasks of Socialists, Pham Binh)

Perhaps it is something of an inevitability that problems like these should emerge in a movement so young and so novel, but that does not mean we can or should attempt to ignore them, to fail to achieve their positive resolution. And that is a key task that confronts us.

This is only one example of the limits and the associated complications of the tendency for the movement to fetishize ?ultra-individualist-participatory? forms and methods of organization (i.e., mass assemblies without formal representation and autonomous or semi-autonomous working bodies) and the attendant decision-making process known as ?modified-consensus.? The realities of autonomous or even semi-autonomous bodies operating independently without formal instruction and even, possibly, in contradiction to one another, of waiting potentially for General Assemblies to convene to decide exigent issues, of requiring 9/10s of those in attendance to agree on a specific course of action, of an ?official?aversion to democratically elected leadership bodies responsible to the assemblies and participants as a whole, were brought to bear with reference to events in Oakland, the physical dismantlement of the occupied spaces by state forces, and the inability (thus far) to determine
what we want and how we intend to get it. Had there been a leadership elected that won its status on the basis of providing the most robust and far-sighted democratic direction and ideas for how to resist effectively the police breakup of the camps, then they might still exist today.

Similarly, one of the main obstructions to developing #Occupy into a mass force capable of raising the struggle against the 1% to a whole new level of intervention and activism was the difficulties modified consensus created and reinforced by being unable to bring into struggle those millions who were unable to attend the camps on a consistent basis for a variety of reasons. Without representative democracy, committees and councils of democratically elected, city-wide bodies, millions more could not bring their voices, their demands, or share their plights, bringing them out into the light of day.

Even more frustratingly, without representation and elected bodies, there was no substantial way to link all the #Occupies together in common action. Coordinated police action to tear down campsites coast to coast demonstrated why it was so crucial to have a more nationally-coordinated leadership.

The whole debate on the importance of political demand or whether they were necessary at all was a rather drawn up and complicated ordeal. Positively speaking, the principal slogan of the movement, "Occupy everything; demand nothing," helped rally multifarious tendencies and political traditions beyond the typically encountered parameters of struggle we’ve seen dominate the landscape for the better part of a decade: single-issue campaigns. It helped open up the floodgates to a powerful outpouring of distress and anger against the 1%, the government that serves its needs, and the capitalist system that makes possible their power and privilege. Yet, at the same time, it fostered a lengthy "interregnum" between the initial construction of the campsites and the eventual breakdown whereby no clear-cut positions, not even a basic demand for full-employment was approved successfully.

Demands were brought to the table for discussion and voting, but they could not surmount the onerous threshold of 90% approval. As a consequence, the camping continued, but there was solid political foundation on which many tents and canopies were erected. The initial strength of the slogan eventually engendered and reinforced contradictorily a structural weakness.

Reviving the movement from its present lull and strengthening it will mean drawing practical conclusions from these experiences, preserving the fundamental infrastructure and organizational forms we have developed, and making them even more effective, functional, and inclusive.

A good start would be to begin the process whereby we develop a nationally-coordinated, democratically-elected body, committee, council, or whatever you might like to call it, to link the movement together, to coordinate its activities in tandem between cities and towns.

Next, judging by the difficulties witnessed between assemblies, working-bodies, spokes-councils, the problems that occurred over tactical questions and their execution, the debilitating inability to solidify even a basic set of demands or proposals, it seems necessary that we take steps to begin the process whereby we "modify" the model of modified-consensus. This could mean simply reducing the threshold (say to three-fourths, three-fifths, or 50% plus one) it would be necessary to pass proposals and resolutions at assemblies.

Organizationally speaking, individual participation will continue to be the bedrock of the movement; but we need even more people to get involved and see the value in supporting #Occupy. Successfully doing so means developing representative structures by which those without the time or resources to attend meetings, committees, or working groups, can make their voices heard. This will, of consequence, require a relaxation of the overriding convention of "no leadership."

Magnifying the power of occupations necessitates extending them to more spheres of society than we’ve seen thus far: workplaces, schools, any place or setting in which the forces of the 99% has a presence and can flex its muscles.
Most importantly we need to establish a more durable, permanently existing political mechanism that can rally the 99% independently of the Democrats and Republicans — the parties of the 1% — and combat their austerity and anti-working-class policies both on the streets, in the schools, and the workplaces, as well as in the electoral arena as a way of registering mass support for such a resistance and build momentum towards a complete alteration in social relations and the balance of power between the 99% and the 1% in the form of a revolution — one that would bring the working millions to direct power. For we need power to make another world possible.

By taking stock of the momentous achievements we made thus far as well as acknowledging our shortcoming and attempting to overcome them, our movement against the 1% and for social equality can not only be restored to its previous height but made stronger in turn.

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Source URL: https://fifthinternational.org/content/building-occupy-20-how-can-we-strengthen-our-movement

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